

Everlasting Punishment

The Fearful Certainty for the Lost

It is truly a fearful thing to be lost!

While we have to confess that at times both extravagant language and fanciful imagery have been used to portray the end of ***“them that obey not the gospel of God”*** (1Peter 4:17), the fact remains that no language is more forcible and no illustration more telling than that found written upon the sacred page of Holy Scripture.

One reason for this fact is that the language of Scripture possesses a spontaneous truth and a solemn soberness that need no embellishment, and which are only spoiled by the addition of human ideas which have no basis save in man’s vain imagination.

Perhaps another reason may be because that which is revealed in Scripture is written from the divine standpoint. That the warnings of eternal doom upon the unrepentant sinner should come to us as the final appeal of infinite love, clothes them with a melting tenderness, as well as a most awful solemnity. He

who would write or speak of these things aright, would need first to bathe his soul in the love of God.

Only one diseased in mind or soul could find pleasure in the thought of the dreadful end which awaits the unsaved. Certainly such an one would be totally out of sympathy with God who has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and whose heart's desire is the salvation of all (Ezek. 33:11; 2Peter 3:9; 1Tim. 2:3-4). However much a man may suffer at the hands of the ungodly – and some have endured unspeakable tortures – yet a true saint could never desire the eternal punishment of a lost soul, anymore than God could Himself (Acts 7:60). Judgement is God's "**strange work**", pursued only with great reluctance (Isaiah 28:21; Lamentations 3:33): mercy is His delight (Micah 7:18). Our pattern in this, as in all else, is the perfect Man (Luke 19:41 ff.; 23:33-34).

Nevertheless, we must never allow ourselves to be betrayed into disbelieving these truths, just because we can find no pleasure in believing them. We must be most careful never to read our own ideas into the language of Scripture, or, to put it the other way round, to read out of them the truth that God intended to convey in them. For if it is wrong to speak of these things without proper feeling, it is far worse to distort them, or to deny them altogether, to satisfy our own carnal feelings as to who or what God is, or what He may do or not do.

Another consideration is that few of the truths of God's Word are so repugnant to the natural mind as God's judgement of sin; consequently few doctrines of the Word of God have been so bitterly assailed as the doctrines of eternal punishment. There are two truths which the human mind cannot really grasp because of its familiarity with sin and human failure in this world; these are the infinite holiness of God, and the exceeding heinousness of sin. To underestimate either will soon lead us to question, if not deny, the teaching of Scripture relative to the doom of the impenitent. The gravity of sin is such that only

the Son of God, from heaven's eternal throne, could put it away: the mightiest archangel could not even begin to help. The holiness of God is such that although His dear Son became the sin-bearer, not one single stroke of divine judgement could be withheld. The doom of the impenitent is so unspeakably dreadful, that the Son of God was willing to become flesh and bear the infinite wrath of Almighty God Himself in order that, at all costs, the sinner might be saved.

For although God finds no pleasure in punishing the ungodly, His word clearly reveals that He will do just this, and that the necessity for such action is to be found in His own essential Being. It is popular theology to emphasise the love of God, even to the extent of belittling His holiness and justice, and of denying the divine revelation of His word which states most positively His hatred of sin and His determination to judge the unrepentant sinner. We believe in the solemn fact of eternal punishment simply because God Himself has warned us of it in His Word.

Many reject the plain truth of Scripture however, by distorting either the nature of the punishment, or the fact of its eternality. Several false cults are teaching annihilation today, though some carefully avoid the plain word, whereas others are teaching that the punishment is corrective, and that once its purpose in correction is achieved, the soul will be released and saved. These ideas are contradictory and both are false.

One thing we have to recognise is, that though Holy Scripture takes up the common language of men, it must necessarily elevate it to describe adequately divine realities. The psalmist tells us this in Psalm 12:6. This means that the true significance of a word when employed in Scripture is not to be gathered only from its origin, or even from its use in contemporary literature, but from its use in Scripture itself. For example the Greek word "*aionios*", which

is translated "**eternal**" or "**everlasting**" is derived from "*aion*" which signifies an age. So some would teach that "eternal punishment" is nothing more than "age-long punishment", and that being tormented "for ever and ever" means no more than being tormented "to the ages of the ages", *i.e.* that the Punishment is limited and will eventually end.

However plausible this argument may seem, it is completely demolished by the most cursory examination of the use of these terms in the New Testament, for this reveals that these are the strongest possible terms for eternality. "*Aionios*" is the word used for "**the everlasting God**" (Rom. 16:26), "**the eternal Spirit**" (Heb. 9:14), "**eternal glory**" (2Tim. 2:10), "**eternal redemption**" (Heb. 9:12), "**eternal inheritance**" (Heb. 9:15) etc., and (over forty times) "**eternal (or everlasting) life**". And since "**everlasting destruction**" occurs in proximity to "**everlasting consolation**" (2Thess. 1:9 and 2:16), "**eternal salvation**" to "**eternal judgement**" (Heb. 5:9 and 6:2), "**eternal fire**" to "**eternal life**" (Jude 7 and 21); and since "**everlasting punishment**" itself appears in the very same sentence as, and in direct contrast to "**life eternal**" (Matt. 25:46), it is evident that the doom of the lost is as lasting as the bliss of the saved, and that both will be for eternity, the lifetime of God.

The same conclusion results from an examination of the phrases "**for ever**" and "**for ever and ever**": compare, for example, 2Peter 2:17 with 3:18; Jude 13 with 25; Rev. 14:11 with 15:7; and 20:10 with 22:5. The words and phrases which define the duration of the punishment of the lost are the strongest possible expression of eternality in Scripture.

It is foolish to argue that a short lifetime of sin can never deserve an eternity of punishment. The time taken to commit a sin does not measure its guilt. Sin is an offence against a God of infinite majesty and holiness, and the sin which seals man's eternal doom

is the rejection of a redemption of infinite price, provided without obligation by infinite mercy; consequently its guilt is infinite.

Although the word **“punishment”** in Matthew 25:46 (*“kolasis”*) may have originally signified remedial discipline, the fact that it is eternal shows that it cannot be remedial in this context. And in its only other occurrence in the New Testament (1John 4:18) where it is translated **“torment”**, it obviously is not remedial. God’s final punishment upon the sinner, when once their last opportunity of repentance in this life has been spurned, is not corrective; it is the outpouring of His divine vengeance (Heb. 10:26-30; Jude 7).

The false doctrine of annihilation or extinction of being, gains an appearance of credibility from the use of such terms as **“the second death”**, **“destruction”**, **“perish”** etc. It can clearly be shown from the Scriptures that death does not mean extinction of being (See pamphlet – “Life and Death”). The other words cover a wide range of meaning. In Luke 15, for example, the **“lost”** (same Greek word as “destroyed” or “perished”) sheep, coin and son (vs. 6,9,32) had certainly not ceased to exist, but they were separated from those to whom they belonged. They had lost, not their being, but their well-being. So **“everlasting destruction”** is separation **“from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power”** (2Thess. 1:9).

When an unrepentant sinner dies, his soul passes into Hades, to be **“tormented”** without relief in the flames of Hell. The Lord Jesus Himself taught this most plainly in Luke 16:19-31. We cannot dismiss this passage as a mere parable, for though the opening words are similar to the opening words of a parable, the Lord never gave names to the persons spoken of in His parables.

The name of the rich man is compassionately withheld, but the inclusion of the name of the beggar, Lazarus, shows that the Lord is referring to a

real person, and to an actual history. This is supported by the language of Jude relative to the cities of the plain (Jude 7); for this verse means nothing if it does not teach that the sinners of those cities destroyed so long ago were still suffering God’s vengeance in the fires of His wrath, and would continue to do so eternally. The warnings of a hell of fire that is never quenched, and a worm that never dies, and of weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth so solemnly repeated by the Son of God are inconsistent with the idea of annihilation (Mark 9:43 ff.). To be annihilated is to become as if one had never been born, but **“perdition”** is a fate worse than that (Matt. 26:24; John 17:12).

At the great white throne the lost dead will be judged, their souls will be given up by Hades and reunited to their bodies which will be raised in a condition of eternal continuance. After the judgement they will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15). Other passages in this same book show that this does not mean cessation of existence. The beast and the false prophet, two wicked men of the last days, are still there after one thousand years, and will be there in torment **“for ever and ever”** (v10). This is the awful fate of those cast into the lake of fire (ch. 14:10-11). There will be different degrees of severity, according to the measure of personal guilt (Matt. 10:15; 11:22,24; Rev. 20:12), but the punishment is eternal.

It is true that the lake of fire, or Gehenna (Hell), as the Saviour frequently called it, was prepared not for man but for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). Nevertheless those who yield their allegiance to Satan rather than to God’s Son must share the devil’s doom eternally, instead of heaven with Christ eternally.

Whether the fire is literal or figurative is a matter of little moment. It will afflict both body and soul (Matt. 10:28), and is a dreadful reality.

Truly, it is a fearful thing to be eternally lost!